

## Civil War Book Review

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### Glory in the Name: A Novel of the Confederate Navy

Don Evans

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## Review

Evans, Don

Fall 2003

**Nelson, James L.** *Glory in the Name: A Novel of the Confederate Navy*. William Morrow, \$24.95 ISBN 60199695

Secesh at sea

Novel considers the war on the water

James L. Nelson takes a lot for granted in his new novel, **Glory in the Name**. And that attitude makes for a book that is more paint-by-numbers than an insightful study of people caught up in the horrors and wonders of the American Civil War.

The book is an account of the naval war in America, a topic that few novelists have approached. And Nelson's background--he wrote the masterful *Revolution at Sea* series--would seem to make him the ideal person to tell the story. But the only reason this boat floats is because it is a lightweight.

**Glory** tells the story of Samuel Bowater, a U.S. Navy lieutenant at the start of the book, and a moneyed resident of Charleston. Bowater resigns his commission after Fort Sumter is fired upon and decides to build a career on the shifting sands of the Confederacy.

Bowater draws an assignment to a converted tugboat, the *Cape Fear*, which is put to work ferrying ammunition and supplies from Norfolk to outposts along the North Carolina coast.

Joining Bowater is Hieronymous Taylor, who abandoned a life of privilege in New Orleans for the dingy world of boiler rooms. He serves as the counterpoint to Bowater's aristocratic view of the war--while Bowater runs the ship upstairs and maintains a life of utmost propriety, Taylor revels in his below-decks world.

Robley Paine fills out the rest of the main cast of characters. Paine is a Mississippi plantation owner who sends his three sons off to the war and is then driven to find his own role in the conflict.

This is rote Civil War and superficial at that. The book is filled with noble sentiments and minstrel show darkies. Soap opera relationships are par for the course. Bowater has a profound love for his home state of South Carolina, but Nelson never tells the reader where that love comes from or why Bowater feels so strongly about his heritage. Bowater had not thought much about any of the questions that were tearing the nation apart, questions of sovereignty and the permanence of Union, questions of slavery... Bowater was a man of the sea and did not give a damn what happened in Kansas or Missouri. Well, that makes Nelson's job so much easier.

The contrast between Bowater and Taylor couldn't be more pronounced. The two sense their profound differences beyond rank and life's station from their first meeting when Bowater shows up to take command of the *Cape Fear* in Wilmington.

Bowater's notions of order and place are tested in Taylor, who is impertinent and sneering--some might say pragmatic--at the best of times. The aristocrat sees a semi-human creature tending the essential machinery of the boat, but he is mystified that such a man can play Mozart flawlessly after one hearing and can keep the boat's engines running smoothly under the most trying of conditions.

Taylor is a very special engineer, and Nelson breathes more life into him than he does into Bowater. Taylor sees the mechanical world as a release from the obligations and niceties of real life. Relationships are based on unfaltering measurements that can be fixed with the proper tools. It is a world of poetry and joy for him. The general run of mechanics and engineers could never see the poetry in the machine, Nelson writes. They saw pipes and valves and condensers and such, but they could not see the magic, the absolute beauty, in such mechanical perfection. There were times when Hieronymous Taylor would look on his engine, with all its parts running with interlocking grace, knowing that inside those pipes and trunks and hot wells and condensers the beast was living and dying, and he would tear up--actually cry--for the sheer beauty of the thing.

Robley Paine's part in the book is the most wrenching. His hatred for the North and what he sees as its merciless invaders drive him to devote his life and

wealth to vengeance, to seek a way to hurt the Yankees as much as they have wounded his family. His world is destroyed by the war, and he is pushed to madness and ultimately to a search for a way to end his life honorably. His neighbors avoid him, and the worst of it is he doesn't care so long as his march to a reckoning is unimpeded. Paine's transit through the book is like stitches being ripped from a poorly dressed wound before the scar has solidified.

**Glory in the Name** contains some of the oddest talking Southern men I've ever encountered in a novel. I've lived in the South my whole life, but I've never heard its denizens converse like Nelson has some of them talk. I've never heard a white man use the word *gots* in a declarative sentence, much less a man from New Orleans. And blacks may use the word *massuh* when referring to those who oversee them, but they sure don't convert *mister* to *missuh*.

Nelson supplies the plot with Union characters, both real and fictitious, but they are perfunctory at best. They serve no purpose but to move the Southern characters from point A to point B. The Yankees are depicted in either nameless hordes or as individual scoundrels, buffoons, and cheaters. In one of the naval fights, Bowater and a Yankee captain tip their hats at one another as their ships pass--they knew each other in the old Navy--but then the Yankee has the temerity to fire on Bowater from the rear.

Where Nelson succeeds in the book is in his depictions of nautical life and the battles on the rivers and seas of the Confederacy. His descriptions of naval procedure and battles are worth the price of the book. There's plenty of sheers, brows, luffs and fidleys to please any naval buff. Life in the boiler room with the engineer and his coal tenders is well drawn. The action to save the Norfolk dry dock in the early days of the war and the battle for Henry Hill during First Manassas are taut and exciting, with an effective blend of action and worry. Bowater's first foray into naval combat when he takes the *Cape Fear* on a raid of a Union naval port is harrowing.

The naval action at Hampton Roads, Roanoke Island, and Elizabeth City are ably illustrated, as is the climactic fight for New Orleans. It's obvious that Nelson spent a lot more time on the action sequences and descriptions of ships than on characterizations. But it's hard to feel much sympathy for boats. That's too bad, because **Glory in the Name** could have been a Civil War classic.

*Don Evans is a newspaper editor and the author of Locust Alley: A Novel of the Civil War (2000).*